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DEPARTMENT FOR R, P, AND NEA

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SUBJECT: COMBATING EXTREMISM: STREET-LEVEL COMPETITION IN THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

REF: STATE 159129

1. SUMMARY: The USG, GOE, and a wide range of non-governmental organizations in Egypt are vigorously engaged in efforts to combat extremism. In response to reftel request, this message describes efforts in Egypt to reduce the sources of extremism, counter extremism in the media, create a political and social space for competing ideas, and promote religious tolerance and lawful resolution of conflict. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

2. Extremism in Egypt is a product in part of domestic political, economic, and social systemic shortcomings, as well as historic opposition to USG foreign policy in the region. Although extremism has tended to arise from disadvantaged areas of the Sinai, Upper Egypt and the slums of the larger cities, it has also affected middle and upper-class youth. Extremism has expressed itself most dramatically in attacks that killed tourists as well as Egyptians in Taba, Sharm el Sheikh and Islamic Cairo and were clearly intended to strike at the existing regime by crippling the tourism industry. Though most Egyptians vehemently reject the indiscriminate killing, extremist ideologies have taken root among significant segments of disaffected youth.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROGRAMS AIMED AT YOUTH

3. In recent years the Mission has shaped its Public Affairs activities to target a younger, broader audience of non-elites, taking our message to the streets and universities and out of Cairo in order to combat extremism and promote other mission objectives.

4. In December Al-Azhar University, one of Islam's most influential learning centers, will host Imam Bashar Arafat of Baltimore for discussions with students and scholars. This is the first Embassy-sponsored speaker in recent memory to deal directly with religious extremism. The program grew out of contacts nurtured by the Regional English Teaching Office (RELO), which supported Al-Azhar's English teaching program. The Mission will lay the groundwork for Imam Bashar and other activities aimed at Islamic opinion leaders through iftars and other Ramadan events.

5. From the Ambassador to junior officers, the Mission engages in frequent contact with groups of students, young professionals and journalists through public speaking and informal contact aimed at highlighting the benefits of our binational partnership for ordinary Egyptians.

6. Featuring book-discussions and DVC's with U.S. authors, the post's Arabic book translation raises awareness and promotes tolerance among youth by exposing them to young-adult literature as well as economic and political non-fiction. Among the titles this year are "Politics and Religion in the United States" and Fareed Zakaria's "The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad".

7. A few steps away from Alexandria University, the American Center in Alexandria and our Cairo Information Resource Center counter extremism through youth outreach, offering Internet workshops and free Internet to the library patrons and conducting monthly school visits. The Alexandria center hosts an active Voice of America club, which includes several hundred students and young professionals; it also offers student counseling and English instruction conducted by the NGO Amideast.

8. Key to the anti-extremist effort is the Mission's Information Office in the Public Affairs Section, which ensures that the message of official USG spokespersons is made clear in the Egyptian media. Cairo remains an information hub for the Arab world, serving as the home base for many regional correspondents. The Public Affairs section regularly works with them to counter extremist

information.

19. Monitoring hate-speech and incitement are likewise primary missions of the Information Office. The Embassy demarches the GOE and contacts chief editors to raise our concerns about hate speech in the Egyptian media whenever warranted.

10. The Mission also supports efforts by Egyptian NGOs to counter extremism through a civil society grant program. In FY05, we issued \$1 million in 632(a) funds from USAID to Egyptian civil society organizations such as the Ibn Khaldun Center the Center and the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, which support community self-help and civic awareness.

EXCHANGES

11. Exchange visits to the U.S. are among our most important tools in the fight against extremism. They provide first-hand exposure to the tolerance and hospitality of American society, countering the myth that Americans are anti-Islam. In FY05 the exchanges unit assisted 414 visitors on USG-sponsored programs, including Fulbright scholarships, the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), Citizens' Exchanges, and Partnership for Youth Learning. A growing pool of exchange alumni participates in follow-on activities such as the Model U.S. Congress at Cairo University. Recently a group of exchange alumni met with Undersecretary Karen Hughes, providing frank feedback on our public diplomacy in the Muslim world on her first trip as Undersecretary.

12. Equally valuable are visits to Egypt by Americans, especially youth, who not only represent our values and diversity and put a human face on America, but also demonstrate our desire to engage with Arabs and Muslims. Living with Egyptians and attending universities and schools, they have a great multiplier effect. These ordinary American citizens, many of whom are studying Arabic, deflate the myths about American violence and arrogance conveyed by the action films and a hostile news media.

13. Of special importance are Egyptian religious figures like the GOE-funded Islamic scholars from Al-Azhar whom the Consular Section and Public Affairs helped visit the U.S. during Ramadan to carry out interfaith dialogue and meet with American Muslim communities. This year the Public Affairs section will arrange programs with the imams after their return.

USAID ACTIVITIES

14. By their very nature most USAID activities in Egypt help counter extremism by providing youth with hope for the future via education, jobs, a sound infrastructure and opportunities for democratic participation. Certain projects aim specifically at populations vulnerable to extremist influence.

15. For example, a \$273,000 grant to the Tur Sinai Investors Association provides economic opportunities for Bedouins and migrants to South Sinai -?the scene of the Sharm el Sheikh and Taba terrorist bombings in 2004 and 2005. Similar support for community organizations encourages the development of leadership skills, constituency relations and human rights awareness among marginalized groups in poor districts of Cairo and regional towns like Minya and Beni Sweif.

16. USAID's 5-year, \$14.4 million Professional Media Development Program will assist print, television, radio, and other electronic media to present a more balanced picture of regional and national affairs, countering the sensationalist news presentation that panders to religious prejudices and chauvinism.

17. To address the widespread unemployment among Egyptian youth, one of the chief economic factors behind extremism, USAID's assistance strategy for 2004-2009 includes significant support for small and micro enterprises, which employ 60 percent of the Egyptian labor force. USAID has been the largest financier of microfinance initiatives in Egypt since 1990, supporting more than 70 percent of activities in this sector and providing about \$530 million to more than 600,000 small and micro enterprises.

18. Likewise, the establishment of Qualifying Industrial Zones and negotiations towards a Free Trade Agreement will create thousands of jobs, creating hope for the future and taking the edge off of the despair that haunts so many Egyptian youths and drives some of them to violence.

GOE ACTIVITIES TO COUNTER EXTREMISM

119. Through the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf) and other government bodies, the GOE regulates and monitors the practice of Islam in Egypt with the aim of identifying and isolating propagators of extremism in mosques and theological institutions. Spiritual leaders appointed by the GOE, including the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, the Mufti of the Republic, and the President of Al-Azhar University, speak out frequently against extremist deviations from Islam. Their credentials as Islamic scholars underscore their credibility throughout the Islamic world.

120. In the wake of recent terrorist attacks, these scholars redoubled efforts through the media, lectures, and other fora, to affirm Islam's commitment to peace and tolerance and debunk extremist theologians. The clerics' efforts are supplemented by a broad spectrum of commentators in both the state-controlled and independent broadcast and print media, who lay out detailed cases against extremist ideology and violent acts.

COUNTERING EXTREMISM: BEST PRACTICES

121. There is no silver bullet for extremism spawned by complex historical and social factors. But the approaches mentioned above have had an impact by stressing the true message of peace and tolerance in Islam, by debunking the myth of an arrogant, anti-Islamic America, and by providing hope to youth who face a dead-end in their careers and personal lives.

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